



State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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Elizabeth Burmaster
State Superintendent

September 12, 2001

An Open Letter to Wisconsin Educators, Parents, and Students:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, will go down in history as a tragic day for America, but for our democracy, it marks an opportunity for our nation to rise to the challenge of coming together as a community. As a community, we can—and we will—recover and begin to heal the wounds brought by the senseless violence that has scarred each and every person who calls America home.

Yesterday was a very difficult day for our country, and I want the educators, parents, and students of Wisconsin to know how much I appreciate their efforts to come together as we all struggle with this national tragedy. As we send our hearts and prayers out to the victims, it is my firm belief we can find strength in each other as we grieve as a nation.

I encourage all of us in Wisconsin to find the confidence in ourselves as a community to rise above the adversity we face together. Tragedy has brought our nation together in the past, and it does so again today. Our nation is strongest when we are united, and throughout history, we have found strength in the face of challenging times. We will persevere, freedom will not be shackled by violence, and the hopes and dreams of our country will live on and grow.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Wisconsin educators for the professional manner in which they worked with parents to help carry our children through the violence of Tuesday's events and its aftermath. Working together, educators, parents, and students can replace that violence with a will to try to understand that we can win the fight to preserve our sense of community and our confidence in ourselves.

Our public schools are the foundation of our democracy, and that foundation stands strong today. As we recognize the impact this tragedy has on our young people, we have a unique opportunity to use this foundation as a source of healing. As we witnessed in sorrow yesterday, our children are confronted with the violence of our society in very real terms. What is important now is to provide our children with a renewed dedication to make gentle the life of this world.

Our children will be looking to us for answers to questions that unfortunately may not have easy answers. Children have been called the "truth tellers." They don't always tell the truth, but they do listen for the truth. We can learn a lot about our community by engaging with our children's reaction to this unprecedented tragedy. Children are desperately seeking role models to believe in and in whom to entrust their dreams.

Never lose sight of the tremendous influence you have. You hold the power to instill in our children an appreciation of our nation's strength, our ability to stand united as one people, our democracy's gift of freedom, and the undying hope that we will move forward lifted by our sense of community.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth Burmaster".

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Department of Public Instruction resources for helping the community heal, recover, and move forward together

Immediate responses to disasters include shock and denial. These are normal, protective reactions. Shock leaves one feeling stunned or dazed. One may temporarily feel numb. As shock subsides, reactions vary.

Common responses include persistent fears (about being separated from family), sleep disturbances, loss of concentration and irritability, physical complaints, withdrawal and listlessness. These symptoms occur as part of the normal, immediate human response to overwhelming events.

Adults can begin to restore emotional well being by acknowledging feelings, asking for support, reestablishing routines, reaching out to others. They can care for the needs of children and youngsters by listening to their feelings and fears, providing information to clarify what occurred and whether it can affect their lives, and by reestablishing routines that will comfort and reassure.

Additional resources regarding responding to a crisis

Helping Children After a Disaster: Facts for Families from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/disaster.htm>

Responding to a Crisis at School, UCLA Center on Mental Health in Schools
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/resource.htm#crisis>

FAQ: Stress response to Traumatic Events, Psychworks, Inc.
<http://www.psychworks.com/PTSD%20response.htm>

Managing Traumatic Stress, American Psychological Association
<http://helping.apa.org/therapy/traumaticstress.html>

Responding to Terrorist Attacks: How to Talk to Children, DeanCare, Inc.
<http://deancare.com/terrorism.html>

Responding to Children's Concerns About Actual and Threatened School Violence: Suggestions for Parents, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlsea/sspw/respchild.html>

Helping Children Cope With Tuesday's Acts of Terrorism Tips for Parents and Teachers

(From the National Association of School Psychologists)

Tuesday's tragic acts of terrorism are unprecedented in the American experience. Children, like many people, may be confused or frightened by the news and will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As the nation learns more about what happened and why, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and so are the other important adults in their lives. Explain that these buildings were targeted for their symbolism and that schools, neighborhoods, and regular office buildings are not at risk.
3. **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that the government emergency workers, police, fireman, doctors, and even the military are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.
4. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
6. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
7. **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
8. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. **For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!**

What Parents Can Do

1. **Focus on your children over the next day or so.** Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

2. **Make time to talk with your children.** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. **Stay close to your children.** Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.
4. **Limit the amount of your child's television viewing of these events.** If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don't sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.
5. **Maintain a "normal" routine.** To the extent possible stick to your family's normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., **but don't be inflexible.** Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
6. **Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed.** These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.
7. **Safeguard your children's physical health.** Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.
8. **Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families.** It may be a good time to take your children to church or the synagogue, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.
9. **Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope.** Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

What Schools Can Do

1. **Assure children that they are safe** and that schools are well prepared to take care of all children at all times.
2. **Maintain structure and stability within the schools.** It would be best, however, not to have tests or major projects within the next few days.
3. **Have a plan for the first few days back at school.** Include school psychologists, counselors and crisis team members in planning the school's response.
4. **Provide teachers and parents with information** about what to say and do for children in school and at home.
5. **Have teachers provide information directly to their students,** not during the public address announcements.
6. **Have school psychologists and counselors available** to talk to student and staff who may need or want extra support.
7. **Be aware of students who may have recently experienced a personal tragedy** or a have personal connection to victims or their families. **Even a child who has been to visit the Pentagon or the World Trade Center may feel a personal loss.** Provide these students extra support and leniency if necessary.
8. **Know what community resources are available** for children who may need extra counseling. School psychologists can be very helpful in directing families to the right community resources.
9. **Allow time for age appropriate classroom discussion and activities.** Do not expect teachers to provide all of the answers. They should ask questions and guide the discussion, but not dominate it. Other activities can include art and writing projects, play acting, and physical games.
10. **Be careful not to stereotype people or countries that might be home to the terrorists.** Children can easily generalize negative statements and develop prejudice.

11. **Refer children who exhibit extreme anxiety, fear or anger to mental health counselors** in the school. Inform their parents.
12. **Provide an outlet for students' desire to help.** Consider making get well cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy, or writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals as well as emergency rescue workers, firefighters and police.
13. **Monitor or restrict viewing** of this horrendous event as well as the aftermath.

For information on helping children and youth with this crisis, contact NASP at (301) 657-070 or visit NASP's website at www.nasponline.org

NASP represents 22,000 school psychologists and related professionals throughout the United States and abroad. NASP's mission is to promote educationally and psychologically healthy environments for all children and youth by implementing research-based, effective programs that prevent problems, enhance independence and promote optimal learning. This is accomplished through state-of-the-art research and training, advocacy, ongoing program evaluation, and caring professional service.

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